



The Birth of a Nation

Re-Birth of a Nation's Shame Tim Crumrin

Birth of a Nation was a landmark in cinema history. Director D.W. Griffith's 1915 epic broke new ground in movie storytelling. It featured innovative techniques, like wide shots, closeups and spectacular scenes. The 12-reel film was nearly three hours long in an age when most movies were less than thirty minutes. Its ticket price of \$2.00 was nearly ten times that of other movies. When it finally appeared in Terre Haute in January 1916 at the Grand Theater many local movie fans thought it "worth every cent." It played to continuous packed houses. In modern terms, the film grossed nearly three billion dollars at the box office. It was much heralded in its time as an absolute masterpiece.

But *Birth of a Nation* is also among the worst, most damaging films of all time, both for its presentation of a false history (similar to execrable JFK by Oliver Stone) that became true in the minds of many, and its blatant racism would continue a horrid legacy in American society. Griffith was the son of a Colonel in the Confederate Army, seemingly nursed from a babe at the bottle of the mythic "Lost Cause" of the "Noble south." His epic was based on the novel by Thomas Dixon, a Methodist preacher whose boon companion was a bottle of bourbon, titled *The Clansman*. Dixon's book was filled with scenes of blacks raping white

women and other foul deeds which inevitably led to lynchings to satisfy southern honor.

The first half of "Birth" dealt with the Civil War, mainly from a Confederate viewpoint. Its war scenes, the Appomattox surrender and the assassination of Lincoln (the fact that Booth was a southern sympathizer went unmentioned) thrilled audiences. It was brilliant film-making and generally faithful to the historic truth.

But the second half was a vicious, racist rendering of Reconstruction, in which rapacious northern carpetbaggers and sub-human "darkies" were depicted as carrion feasting upon the last bits of flesh of the fallen South. Blacks, many played by white actors in blackface, were portrayed as little more than simple-minded apes, as ravenous beasts with enormous appetites for food and white woman. Scenes depicted blacks who were elected to Congress cavorting wildly through the chambers like animals, gorging themselves on food and liquor as if they were the direct heirs of Henry the Eighth.



The NAACP immediately recognized the threat to Blacks that the film. It stated that the film pictures Negroes in the worst possible light." They knew it would only fuel racial tensions. They were right. Racist attacks on Blacks often increased in areas, particularly in the South, following film showings. Their efforts

to ban the film, or at least to educate film-goers about its false portrayals of Negroes did not meet with success.

Thus did a false history become implanted in the minds of those who saw it. In his book, *The Fiery Cross* (published in 1987, but still the finest overview of Klan history), Wyn Craig Wade noted that the film "united White Americans in a vast national drama, convincing them of a past that had never been." An article in the *Terre Haute Saturday Spectator* (later a foe of the Klan) which appeared a few weeks after the film was shown at the Grand was one of the few papers to try to point out the dangers of the film. The "Klu Klux, who were paraded as heroes, were nothing of the kind," it boldly stated. It went on to say that the Klan was a tool to disenfranchise Blacks and allow the passage of heinous Jim Crow laws. Few people seemed to learn from that lesson.

The film's glorification of the Klan led many to think it was time it came back. After all the country, they said, was being overrun with immigrants, many of the Catholic, uppity negroes and rabble rousers. What was needed was a group to fight for "100-percent Americanism."

William Simmons was an Alabama-born dreamer aimlessly moved through life "selling garters and 'teaching history.'" He became a Methodist minister whose boon companion was a bottle of good southern bourbon. Well-fortified by bourbon Simmons sat by his window one solitary night and saw a vision of ghost riders filled the sky. The apparitions continued to haunt his mind. What could they mean? Were they meant to show a purpose for him?

Simmons was living in Atlanta when *Birth of a Nation* had its premiere. Already a devoted fan of Dixon's *The Clansman*, Simmons was swept up by the film and its Klan scenes. There on the screen seemed to be the personification of the ghost riders of his vision. The dreamer saw a chance for his dreams to become all too real. He immediately set about reviving the Klan. On October 15, 1915 the "Knights of the Klu Klux Klan" was chartered in Georgia as a social organization at his request.

As with any great media success, "Birth" spawned its imitators. Movies like "one Clear Call" were brazen exploitations of "Birth's" Klan scenes. There even developed a series of low budget "Klan Films" sponsored by the Klan. There were even Klan theaters devoted to showing such films, like the one in Noblesville, Indiana (ironically the town that would later be the site of the Indian Klan boss D.C. Stephenson's murder trial in 1925).

But *Birth of the Nation* was always the king and continually used as a recruiting tool for the Klan, which show the film to lure in possible recruits. It would also help bring the Klan to Vigo County.



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(This is the first of an occasional series of posts on the History of the KKK in Vigo County and Indiana.)

The Northern-Most Southern State

Indiana and the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s were made for each other. One historian thought the Klan founds its "natural home" in the Hoosier state. No other northern state was as engulfed by the KKK as Indiana. It was the only state in the nation that had organized Klan chapters in every county. Vigo County was a particularly fervent Klan stronghold. As many as 40% of adult white men and women in the county joined the organization.

The question is why?

Historian Linda Gordon posited several reasons for the resurgence of the Klan in the 1920s nationally. She noted that Americans

expressed long running nativist sentiments, were natural "joiners" of organizations, applauded vigilante justice and reform movements.

All these and more apply to Indiana and Vigo County.

The southern origins of state's settlers is especially important. Simple geography is the reason for that. Until the coming of the National Road, canals and railroads, the easiest and virtually only way into the state was from the south. The descendants of Daniel Boone and other pathfinders pushed through the Cumberland Gap and populated the upland south. Being natural movers they, like the Lincoln family, continued their migrations northward into Indiana, often using its north-south rivers to move into the state. The majority of Hoosier families of the 1920s could trace their lineage back to its upland southern roots.

This made for a very homogenous population for much of the state's history. There were few "dissident" elements, those of different religions from outside of the British Isles and western Europe. Not until the early 20th century did immigrants from eastern and southern Europe seek to become Hoosiers. Just in time for the All-American KKK to take advantage of the antipathy of native Hoosiers to the newcomers, even though the foreign-born only made up a little more than five percent of the population. Vigo County's foreign-born were 5.6% of the population.

Vigo County had long embraced vigilantism and nativist movements. Some in the county immediately joined the Know-Nothing movement, and its American Party, in the late 1850s. The Know-Nothings were virulently nativist and anti-Catholic who railed against the increased immigration of German and Irish Catholics. The spiritual heirs of the Know-Nothings were the American Protective Association members. The *Terre Haute Saturday Evening Mail* decried the formation of a Vigo County branch in 1887, calling it "a secret organization sectarian in principles and its sole object is to stir up religious strife and foster the spirit of intolerance." The county also had a chapter of little-known nativist group called the Order of United American Mechanics, formed to battle against cheaper foreign laborers they felt were taking their jobs.

One group would become embedded with, and vital to, the 1920s Klan in Indiana. The Horse Thief Detective Association grew from a group formed in Wingate Indiana in 1845. As the name indicates it was, in essence, a vigilante group developed to fight against the theft of horses and other livestock. The HDTA, like similar groups around the country, emerged in rural areas where law enforcement was seldom available. Thus, members felt they had to protect themselves and their property. Eventually, the HDTA became a de facto law enforcement agency when the Indiana legislature gave them arrest powers. In some ways they were more powerful than local sheriffs because they could cross county lines to pursue thieves.

Hoosiers were joiners. Fraternal and charitable organizations abounded throughout the state and Vigo County. Orders like Masons, Eagles, and Knights of Pythias attracted eager members who joined because of a desire to "help," but also enjoyed the convivial camaraderie and social gatherings offered by the groups. The 1920 Terre Haute City Directory listed over 80 "secret and benevolent" societies and lodges. Thus, it was natural for Hoosiers to pay their dues and sign on with a group like the Klan that supposedly reflected their own interests.

Cultural changes were roiling the Indiana landscape during the first decades of the 20th century. The change from a predominately rural society to an urban and industrial one frightened many Hoosiers. They felt their world slipping away from them. They were desperate to hold onto their old lives and feared it was being taken over by those who spoke different languages and had "foreign ways." They were a natural "base" for a group like the KKK and its loud calls for "100 percent-Americanism."

It is no wonder the Hoosier state and Vigo County were more than ready to follow the Klan.

The [Imperial] Wizard of Terre Haute

Tim Crumrin

Some are born to leadership. Some have leadership thrust upon them. And some just hang around long enough it falls into their lap. That was much the case with James Colescott of Terre Haute.

Born in 1897, Colescott (known as Tubby) graduated from the Terre Haute Veterinary College at nineteen. He immediately opened a practice at 3rd & Poplar with Vern Ramsey, an instructor at the college. After US entrance into WW I he joined the Army and was sent to France as an Army veterinarian. While there, he shipped a "Police Dog" back home to his father, with a note saying the dog was a wounded war hero.

Colescott returned to Terre Haute after his discharge, but was recalled to service in 1919 and assigned to Ft. Gordon, a fateful posting. The fort was located in Atlanta, GA, the birthplace of the revived KKK. It was there that Colescott became inculcated in the "new Klan."

He appears to have been a full-fledged believer by his return to Terre Haute in 1923. That same year he was one of the leaders who petitioned the state of Indiana to charter a branch of the Volunteer Protective Association (VPA) in Vigo County. Closely associated with both the Horse Thief Detective Association and the KKK, VPAs were given arrest powers by the state. Purportedly they were to aid police in fighting bootleggers, prostitution and thieves. In many instances they reveled in one particular part of their "job." VPA members loved to haunt lover's lane to spy on and accost lovers found "spooning."

Colescott and his VPA crew also provided "security" for local Klan gatherings. He led the VPA detail at the huge KKK rally in Terre Haute that drew over 50,000 participants in June 1924. Newspapers reported that, among other things, Colescott, Howard Derry and Homer Hendricks captured two pickpockets intent on fleecing the crowd.

It was at that rally that Colescott likely met with Hiram Evans, the Grand Imperial Wizard of the national Klan, who was the big drawing card for the event. He soon proved an asset for Evans. Colescott was blessed with great organizational skills and soon made himself valuable to Evans as a successful recruiter in Indiana and the Midwest. He thus allied himself with Evan's national faction of the Klan instead of D.C. Stephenson's notoriously corrupt personal Indiana Klan fiefdom.

This was important after Stephenson's 1925 murder conviction led many thousands to desert the KKK.

"Tubby" Colescott did his best to restore order to the shattered, shrinking Klan. He worked relentlessly to recruit new members or entice some Klan apostates back into the donning of the white robe. By 1930 he was the official "Grand Wizard" of the Hoosier Klan. He worked closely with the Klan "home office" in Atlanta and took on an increasingly important role in the national KKK, serving as Grand Imperial Wizard Hiram Evans' chief of staff.

Thus, he was in the perfect position when Evans rather unwillingly gave up his seventeen-year reign as Wizard in 1939. Evans had angered many followers when, in a decidedly un-Klan-like move, he announced that he was disavowing the Klan's virulently anti-Catholic stance. Hatred of Catholics had always been a central theme of the KKK.

And so the mantle of Imperial Grand Wizard fell upon the shoulders of James "Tubby" Colescott from Terre Haute, Indiana. Unconfirmed rumors circulated saying Colescott had actually bought the Klan from Evans for several hundred thousand dollars, but that is unlikely.

Colescott's tenure as Wizard was fraught with problems. In 1940 he had to intervene when the New Jersey KKK sought an alliance with the Hitler-supporting German American Bund. The KKK, Evans announced, would no more join with the Hitlerites than it would "communists or negroes." In 1941 the placing of an 185-foot burning cross atop Stone Mountain, Georgia ignited anti-Klan sentiment. He voluntarily testified before the House Un-American Affairs Committee 1942, vowing wholehearted support for the war effort.

WWII further depleted the Klan's rolls. Debts piled up. By 1944 Colescott's KKK faced major tax evasion charges. A lien of nearly \$700,000 was facing the organization. It was all too much. Colescott disbanded the KKK at the April 23, 1944 Klonvocation. Ironically, Colescott sold the Klan's grand headquarters building to the Atlanta Catholic Archdiocese. The revived KKK was officially dead, 29 years after its ugly rebirth.

Colescott then moved to Miami, Florida, where he reunited with his veterinary college mentor Vern Ramsey and opened a private vet practice. He died there in 1950.